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Abstract: *»Quantifizierung und die économie des conventions«*. Analyzing social processes of quantification has close relationship with the origins, core and potentialities of the economics of convention. Quantification and its social organization and goals are now impacted by the turn toward the market for organizing all human activities. Research should focus on the relationship between generalizing the market, transforming the state and changing the role and status of quantification. Retracing the main outcomes of the seminal works on quantification, this paper highlights the contributions that EC could provide in that field.

Keywords: economics of convention, categorization, governance, new public management, objectivity, deliberative democracy.

The theme of quantification has been the subject of research for twenty and even thirty years with the pioneering work of Ian Hacking (1990), and Lorraine Daston (1988) on probability and their history, Theodore Porter (1995), Alain Desrosières (1993) (whose research is organized at the intersection of the history of probability, statistics and action of the State), more recently, among others of Michael Power (1997), and Peter Miller (1987, 1994), on accounting and auditing. Gradually, one can add around the first circle Bruno Latour (1987) on science in action or how to create allies, Laurent Thévenot (including work on the coding in collaboration with Alain Desrosières, 1988), research on the history of social categories (Luc Boltanski 1982; Robert Salais 1986; Bénédicte Zimmermann 2001). Wendy Espeland (2008) with her research on the sociology of quantification and commensurability, represents on the Anglo-Saxon side, the new generation, familiar with the earlier works and continuing the process. Driven largely by Alain Desrosières, a new generation of researchers (Thomas Amossé 2011; Isabelle Bruno 2010; Emmanuel Didier 2011 for example) is investing in France this theme. They include the use of quantification and the statistical argument in public policies. Intrigued by the very special use of performance indicators at European and national level and by the shift from government to governance, research bridges the gap with the accelerated diffu-

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sion of New Public Management techniques and shelving of democracy (Robert Salais 2006, 2007; Isabelle Bruno 2010). The role and status of quantification in the former socialist countries attracts the interest on the similarities and differences with the capitalist countries (Mespoulet 2001). Legal researchers as Alain Supiot (1995, 2005) or Samuel Jubé (2011) have located a renewed subjugation of individual and communities to a power of standardization whose political aspect, related to the mode of construction, categories and concepts, remains hidden in the numbers.

Among all these names, one can recognize the role of researchers belonging to the economics of convention in the theorization and empirical research on social processes of quantification. In his contribution to the HSR 36 (4) special issue, Alain Desrosières (2011) has shown how deeply the development of the economics of convention is linked to considerations about statistical categories, the conventions of qualification and measurement of social problems, their history, their connection with public policies and the state. In his contribution, too, Laurent Thévenot (2011) has identified the role of conventions on what he called “the politics of statistics”. What are or could be the specific contribution of the economics of convention in the following years? We would like here to address some intuitions and questions in direction of the research debate.

That EC contribution should, in our view, focus on what is changing, with the spread of market as general mode of organizing all human activities, on the economic, political and social role of quantification.

The historical trunk of research in terms of quantification (say, for short, those of Daston 1988; Hacking 1990; Desrosières 1993; Porter 1995) has developed research mostly as part of the more general history of science and technology, of their instruments and institutions. They have then observed what these instruments and institutions produced: transforming qualities in quantities (measurement conventions, conventions of equivalence); doing things and creating things commensurable; creating and disseminating general categories and meanings that are traveling and becoming common knowledge; founding the collective decision (in business or government) on a new type of objectivity: impersonality, standardization, creation of black boxes, credibility based on science and technology. These results are of great value and a lot remains to be done in these directions.

However, one should now move towards research at the crossing of economics, history, law and political science, dedicated to the relationship between generalizing the market, transforming the state and changing the role and status of quantification.

With the development of the market, we are facing a prospect of dissolution of the “collective” and of the “public”, of their legitimacy, of their collective acknowledgement. Whether for law (as suggested by Alain Supiot), currency (see the recent work of André Orléan 2011) or quantification – the three instruments building and supporting the collective dimension – such dissolution would be in favor of the utopia of a spontaneous order. The de-categorization is on the agenda. It is not only (although this is important) that we are witnessing an attempt to substitute government by law with governance by the numbers. In this attempt, two different constitutions are competing for the foundation of state action, law and number. At the same time, law and quantitative methods are taken in the same movement drifting to self-regulation, the "advantage" of number over law being (to be checked) that it dismisses more easily considerations of justice, general interest and fundamental principles.

The first step in this direction was taken by the transition from government to governance in companies as in the State and, increasingly, in collective organizations. In the governance model quantification has no longer the goal to establish the objectivity of collective decision, but to participate in the entry and generalization of the market in all human activities. Properties already established by mainstream research on the quantification are to be rationally manipulated and misguided. Performance and the allocation of responsibility (accountability in its semantic density) become the referents. Quantification is asked to implement competition between beings (whatever these beings are – individuals, companies, states ...), to provide the necessary instruments and to prevent any rising in generality; and not to build collective knowledge (which remained necessary in the usual modes of quantification and of political power). It changes its objects and methods. Note how, for example, panel data and statistical analysis techniques and econometrics techniques of individual data are being implemented to support the hypothesis of widespread competition between individuals; or how the quantitative assessment of performance (as a means of quantifying and principle of governance by benchmarking) has spread to all levels and areas of human activity. Elaborating consensus on conventions of equivalence or constructing general categories is no more required in these conditions. There is no need to collect everyone's experience with representative surveys to consolidate general information that can be opposed to the discourse of rulers. Since on the contrary, quantification has to serve the internalizing by the governed of the constraints determined above.

The program of the New Public Management, which was released in Europe in the 1980s, represents the background from which the gradual transformation of the forms of quantification and its relationship to concomitant changes in law and money (from their foundations, concepts and practices) is developing and is justified. First, the public authority derives its legitimacy not on the rational-legal basis of the procedures for implementing policy choices but on the effectiveness of its actions on targets. Second, it operates "remotely", involving the social partners, by standards and incentives in the pursuit of these goals. The definition of these objectives, thanks to the sophisticated technology that surrounds them, escapes increasingly public debate and is preempted from the outset by the format and the choice of the data. This "government by objectives" leads precisely to a new mode of construction of quantitative data. Performance indicators, measures and evaluation procedures (establishing what Michael Power has defined as an “audit society”) are becoming increasingly important at the expense of the construction of informational bases seeking a form of global coherence (descriptive statistics, embedded systems of tables, or macro-economic models). While such databases should be still needed, these instruments subject them to their steering from above.

There are strong counter-trends, if only because the existing state of affairs and democratic practice are resistant (differently in different areas and countries) because of their long history and rooting. Economics of convention has the capability to reveal such counter-trends and to provide them with theoretical and historical backgrounds. Remember, for instance, the work of Jürgen Kädtler (2011) in the HSR 36 (4) special issue which shows how actors in firms submitted to the domination of financial ratios struggle to make collective debate possible within the firm on the plurality of criteria of economic decision. Such subjects are less worked out in the “classic” corpus which was not primarily interested on the conditions and reason of such resistance within the existing state of affairs and democratic practice. One of the reasons is that they become the blind points of what Theodore Porter (1993, 87) called, perceptively, the *new constructivist realism.* He noted that the old realism (which stood for a world of objects existing independently of scientists) and the old constructivism (for whom the content of science has more to do with human institutions that with anything that can be called an objective world) have merged in the work on science in *a new constructivist realism*: “which denies that a useful distinction is possible between society and the world, and claims that scientific knowledge is true, but chiefly in a relation to a world we have constructed”. This methodological position, which is that of Theodore Porter himself, and Bruno Latour proved fruitful in light of the results. But not going far enough, did it not unwittingly nurtured the illusion that society and the objective world are rationally malleable and could be manipulated, an idea thoroughly exploited by the governance and forms of quantification that follow. Bruno Latour had seen some of the theoretical and practical problems – resistance or rather the freedom of people and objects – but he has solved it by trying to show that the central player in the quantification could implement a strategy of alliances closer and closer with beings (human and nonhuman)[1] that establish the absolutely necessary condition for its success: the compatibility (and equivalence) of what makes up their environment with the thing produced by quantification. Laurent Thévenot (1984) has proposed a more satisfactory solution with the concept of investments in forms that, step by step, changes the surrounding material and rules. But a relative constructivist rationality remains in these approaches.

[1] At the price of a disputable equivalence established between people and things.

Until now, it seems to us, only historical works come to lay concretely and more adequately the problems of constructivist realism. We have, for instance, shown in our work on the history of the category of "unemployment" (Salais, Baverez and Reynaud 1986) that in order to be embodied in the real, statistical category was to "count" on the one hand on the development of social procedures of registration in offices where is identified the status of persons, on the other hand on the process of rationalization of work that was putting in place in firms procedures of abstraction and quantification of work (with which it was possible to measure the non-work and throw it out from the workplace). These surrounding changes of the economic and social reality have no reason to be emerging from the statistical category "unemployment" and yet they are necessary, so to say. They are part of a larger historical process marked by contingency and, therefore, different according to the countries and even specific to each as was observed. Historical processes cannot be rationally ordered. Marie-Noelle Bourguet (1988), reveals how – during the Napoleonic period – statistics by department (one of the disaggregated administrative level in France) has been unable to provide the necessary data for the conscription, the taxes (involving an assessment of wealth), as weights and measures, the description of the land, the classifications of people were different from a department (which often covered a province of the old regime) to another. Witold Kula (1985) goes further, for behind the negative view of backward living, impenetrable to quantification standard (general categories), it shows the fundamental question not yet addressed by the "classical" approach, the one relating to collective self-reliance and shared practical knowledge (and general) that are stemmed from the experience. Kula stresses that the list of grievances in 1789 had a common complaint, that of uniform measures throughout the country, for the peasants were subject to the arbitrary of the Lord who chose what was the most favorable. For example, if the Lord judged the grain of poor quality, he could decide to take a larger container, but to pay the same price. The revolutionary government has responded to this with the metric system – which the farmers saw with suspicion, as they soon realized the ease with which the central government would be able to levy and weigh up taxes. What the farmers wanted above all was to be protected against arbitrary changes of measures. Customary measures were sufficient as long as the public authorities forbade any change, which refers to a different conception of quantification and its relationship with the state policy. It is not immediately standardized and leaves room for the voice of users and citizens.

Regarding the status of quantification, the historical perspective can help us recognize a reversal of the *pyramid* linking its base (the multiplicity of experiences and social knowledge of situations and problems) to the top (global data). This was the pyramid according to which the "classical" quantification implemented in public decisions proceeds. Now the "new" model of governance is based on data set from above: social subjects are expected to comply with.

Even more they are expected to create a reality that eventually spontaneously produces the right data. For in a spontaneous order, self-reference becomes total, the data is a mirror of reality, itself absorbed into the model that built it. We must question the position that in this reversal of the pyramid, will assume the experts' knowledge, the structures and technicians of quantification, with regards to the political nature of these processes and powers involved. This mode of spreading of quantification in all areas that aims to evaluate performances in order to put in competition beings (human and nonhuman) against one another is accompanied and reflects a crisis of representation. For with the dissolution of the collective it implies there would be no more legitimate conflicts likely to re-present (resubmit at the cost of aggregation and reformulation) situations at the global level of the decision.

Autonomy, value of practical knowledge and *voice* in the process of quantification are issues of great modernity in the future. It is a field of research.[2] Theodore Porter was aware of it, but he put it aside, legitimately it seems, in large part because these problems arose later with the current crisis of quantification that we mentioned earlier. It refers in fact to the work of Michael Polanyi on what he called tacit knowledge. These are skills and knowledge that cannot be reduced to rules and recipes, nor be written, which must be learned in a relationship between master and apprentice, or more often in a close association between members of a same group. It may be recalled here that, in his *Treatise on Probability*, John M. Keynes (1921) considered two judgments of probability (and not just one as usual) that he contrasted by mode of formation of the knowledge base on which they rely: one based on general categories and measurement, the other on idiosyncratic knowledge derived from experience. The judgment of probability is for him always situated and referred to the singular person who does it while providing its own knowledge base. This is an action-oriented decision. It has two dimensions, and not one, the quantitative measure of the probability (0.3 for example) and the evaluation of the degree of confidence that the person gives to it.

These issues of autonomy, practical knowledge and voice arise, for example, from works on the analysis of development plans and fight against poverty programs designed by international organizations (e.g. the World Bank). These programs come with their equipment made with cognitive, statistical and political formatting of social reality, in accordance with their goals and methods. So doing they impose their views. Knowledge, tools, and aspirations, conceptions of the populations concerned are ignored or rather judged worthless. This type of quantification installs in practice a denial of democracy. The opposite way is instead to start from the knowledge, tools, and aspirations of the people; that is, from a premise of autonomy, value of local knowledge, of economic efficiency

2 See Ota de Leonardis, Serafino Negrelli and Robert Salais (2012).

of their voice to develop a proper quantification. Even in an indicator approach, one thing is to get them ready-made in one's luggage, another is to allow a participatory and deliberative process in which interested people could freely set their problematic and their indicators. These questions are crucial with the spread of technologies of New Public Management.

Around quantification arise problems crucial for democracy. They are especially about the elaboration of public knowledge that is at the base of choices and actions of the government. Is this public knowledge the result of social processes involving a plurality of voices, expressing various forms of knowledge and different grammars of justice? Are cognitive agreements which are fixed fully recognized in terms of collective elaborations and political compromises? How are the agreements created as to their just character? Say in brief that democracy thrives on opportunities for the governed to claim and exercise the power to define, evaluate themselves and be counted. In a democratic society, the world of scientific research is part (and must do so in full awareness) of a broader social process of knowledge of society by itself. On the contrary, the metamorphoses of the social processes of quantification we have outlined above are a threat to democracy. Because they tend to set the cognitive representation of collective problems that society arises, away from any democratic process. It is political power, or the small group of leaders and experts that exercises this power, which assumes the right to "present" directly in the public arena what to know in order to decide and to act. Thus the road to democratic representation, political and social, is cut off. A self-referential spiral is set up. A striking example is now the mode of treatment of the debt crisis by European authorities.

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